



on implementing special education in charter schools.

SPECIAL REPORT

CREATING STATE-SPECIFIC RESOURCES: A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MODEL THAT WORKS

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INTRODUCTION

State-Specific Resources in Education—The Need

Technical assistance resources produced through national organizations and research groups are invaluable to shaping education policy and practice within the states. They are also an important source for ensuring state education officials and leaders are up to date on the latest best practices. A challenge for state-level personnel, however, is identifying the most efficient and effective strategy for converting the national materials into useable technical assistance documents that can meet the needs of their particular state or locale.

A model developed by the Technical Assistance Customizer (TAC) Project offers state education agencies and other organizations an approach to assist them with converting national findings and resources to state-specific materials in a timely and cost-effective manner. Moreover, the approach recognizes the importance of collaboration with and the input of major stakeholders in the development of usable technical assistance documents that are applicable to state-level audiences. Building upon an approach utilized by leaders at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)¹ and work completed through federally funded projects, the TAC project team designed a technical assistance model specifically to assist state education agencies and other organizations in writing state-specific materials developed from national resources.

Although the implementation of special education in charter schools was the specific issue addressed in the development of the TAC Model, application of this approach has merit in the development of state-specific technical assistance materials in other areas. Feedback from TAC participants highlighted the usefulness of the model and its applicability to a broad range of topics of interest to state agencies. The purpose of this report is to share an approach that is effective and mindful of the time and resources available at state and local levels for the development of technical assistance resources and documents. The process is explained through the TAC Project's experience with converting national technical assistance materials on charter schools and special education into state-specific resources. This article includes background on the charter issue, descriptions of the national technical assistance process and customizing approach, the TAC Model's applicability to other types of technical assistance, and a concluding section on lessons learned.

¹ The NASDE website is available at www.nasdse.org

BACKGROUND

The TAC Model for creating state-specific technical assistance resources was developed as part of a federally funded project designed to assist charter schools in the implementation of special education. This section provides a brief background on the topic and how the project developed the TAC Model.

Charter Schools and Special Education

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) defines a public charter school as:

...a publicly funded school that, in accordance with an enabling state statute, has been granted a charter exempting it from selected state or local rules and regulations. A charter school may be newly created, or it may previously have been a public or private school; it is typically governed by a group or organization (e.g., a group of educators, a corporation, or a university) under a contract or charter with the state. In return for funding and autonomy, the charter school must meet accountability standards. A school's charter is reviewed (typically every 3 to 5 years) and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or the standards are not met (<http://nationsreportcard.gov/glossary.asp>).

Although the basic characteristics of charter schools apply to all states with charter schools, in reality, specific governance and structures of charter schools are defined through each state's charter school law. Forty states and the District of Columbia have enacted charter school laws since 1991 and in each case the state's charter school law follows the broader charter school framework, but has governance and operational characteristics particular to that state.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) as amended by the No Child Left Behind Action of 2001 (NCLB) specifies that, as public schools, charter schools must comply with all federal disability laws. Among other defining characteristics, NCLB states that a charter school is a public school that:

- *complies with the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Act [P. L. 107-110 Sec. 5210(1)(G)]*

Identification of the Need for Technical Assistance

A policy research study, Project SEARCH (Special Education as Requirements in Charter Schools) funded by the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special

Education Programs, conducted in the late 1990s, found that often individuals developing, operating, and overseeing charter schools were confused about the application of the federal disability laws within the charter schools.² While many local and state regulations are waived for public charter schools, some involved with charter schools mistakenly believed that these waivers also applied to disability laws. The study also found that many of those associated with charter schools had difficulty understanding the roles and responsibilities for special education in charter schools especially since the roles may vary depending upon a state's charter school law.

The findings suggested that state education agencies, as well as other stakeholders associated with charter schools, needed assistance in understanding federal and state special education and charter school laws and in the implementation of the laws. With the rapid and continuing growth of the charter sector, it was important that technical assistance be developed to address the issues raised through Project SEARCH.

Developing National Technical Assistance Resources

To address the revealed technical assistance needs, the U. S. Department of Education Charter School Program Office funded a technical assistance project entitled Special Education Technical Assistance for Charter Schools (SPEDTACS). The project, funded in 2001, was charged with designing charter school and special education technical assistance materials and resources for dissemination across the nation. Through SPEDTACS, a set of three documents entitled *Primers on Implementing Special Education in Charter Schools* was designed to address the roles and responsibilities of charter school operators/developers, authorizers, and state officials. The Primers were developed with input from stakeholders from across the country. The input provided the framework for the national Primers. Each was written in a user-friendly question and answer format.

Once the Primers were completed, a website was developed for the dissemination of the Primers and other information about special education in charter schools.³ The website, which is updated regularly, includes the Primers, PowerPoint presentations, and other resources designed for professional development in the area of special education and charter schools.

The national Primers **were designed to provide information to a large national audience**, but do not give the specifics about implementation for each state. Given the variability of charter school laws and how the differences in the laws significantly affect the identification of roles and responsibilities for special education, state-specific technical assistance was needed to address the issues facing each of the states that have enacted charter school laws.

² The Final Report from Project SEARCH is available at <http://www.nasds.org/Portals/0/Documents/ProjectSearch.pdf>

³ The Primer website is at www.uscharterschools.org/specialedprimers

Customizing National Materials to Meet State Needs

With the knowledge that materials focused on a national perspective could not provide the level of assistance needed to address state-specific charter school and special education issues, in 2004 the U.S. Department of Education Charter Schools Program Office funded the Technical Assistance Customizer (TAC) Project. Through the TAC Project, a process was designed to use the national Primers as foundational resources to further develop technical assistance documents to meet the needs of individual states. Using the TAC approach, 13 states converted the national technical assistance materials into state-specific documents designed to address special education issues in their state's charter sector.⁴

THE TAC MODEL

At its core, the TAC Model maximizes the expertise of stakeholders in converting national resources into state-specific technical assistance materials. The process uses time effectively so that stakeholders can have input with minimal impact on their day-to-day responsibilities. To maximize efficiency, the process utilizes technology for economy of time and resources.

The TAC process involves convening a group of approximately 20 stakeholders from 3 PM until 8 PM one day and from 8 AM to 3 PM the following day, allowing the work of *tailoring* the national resource for an individual state to be completed within a 24-hour period. Although there is a need for follow-up and follow-through after the meeting, the bulk of the work is completed within this time period. The result is a set of state-specific technical assistance documents that draws from the expertise of stakeholders and is built upon existing national materials.

Those participating in the TAC process have specific roles and responsibilities. These include the organizer, the state or organization contact person who is overseeing the process, the facilitators, and the stakeholder group that is providing input into the revisions. The roles are discussed below with examples how of the TAC Project implemented the model provided.

Roles and Responsibilities: The Organizer

The organizer plays an important role in the tailoring of national technical assistance materials. The project director from NASDSE served in that role for the TAC Project. However, the organizer can be someone from within the state education agency or from a local or state organization. Once the national technical assistance material has been chosen for customizing, the organizer:

- works with state officials to identify participants, typically stakeholders in the topic area, for inclusion in a meeting;

⁴ A list of links to the state specific Primers is available at http://www.uscharterschools.org/specialedprimers/download/state_primers_links.doc

- provides materials for review by the participants;
- sets the agenda for the workgroup meeting;
- arranges all the other logistics of the meeting; and
- provides follow-up to ensure the final product is completed.

Roles and Responsibilities: The State Contact

The state contact person plays an important part in the successful implementation of the TAC Model. They lead the effort at the state education agency and work with the organizer throughout the process. For the TAC Project, state charter school officials and/or the state director of special education or their designees made the decision to be involved in the activity. They recognized the benefit of the process and the need for state-specific technical assistance materials in the area of special education and charter schools and championed the effort within the agency. The state contact person:

- develops a budget for the process;⁵
- selects, in concert with others in the state, approximately 20 individuals to participate in the workgroup meeting;
- assists with the meeting logistics such as lodging for those from outside the meeting area;
- navigates the state-specific product through the state's vetting process for approval and dissemination; and
- works with stakeholders on the implementation of a dissemination plan.

Roles and Responsibilities: The Facilitators

The TAC Project had a team of five expert consultants who executed the activities of the project. The organizer plus two other team members facilitated the individual state meetings. In replicating this model, the number of facilitators may vary depending on the task and the number of meeting participants. However, the facilitators should have a substantive understanding of the content as they play a critical role in leading the discussion amongst the various state team members. The meeting facilitators:

- provide the background information and context to the meeting;
- research each state's issue (e.g., state charter laws, special education models);
- facilitate the revision process in the workgroup meeting.

⁵ Activities that were part of the TAC Project were funded through the federal grant that created the project so there was no cost to the states involved. Without funding from an external project, a state would need to cover the expenses involved in the workgroup meeting.

Roles and Responsibilities: The Meeting Participants

The meeting participants or stakeholders are key to the TAC process. For the revision of the charter school and special education national primer, stakeholders were typically chosen from various constituencies including the state education agency's charter school and special education departments, the state charter school association and/or resource center, charter school operators and authorizers, and experts or organizations integrally involved in charter schools in their state. It is important to this type of activity that the workgroup participants represent as fully as possible all the stakeholders who have an interest in the issue in order to increase confidence in the resulting product as a valuable resource. Meeting participants:

- review the national technical assistance materials distributed to them prior to the meeting;
- attend the meetings prepared to provide their expertise and perspective to the revision of the national materials; and
- provide feedback on the various drafts of the document, typically via email.

The TAC Process: The Agenda

One of the attractive components of the TAC process is that the majority of the onsite work is completed within a 24-hour period. Participants arrive at 3 PM one day, giving them time to complete tasks associated with their positions, and complete the TAC work by 3 PM the following day. The agenda addresses setting the context, reviewing background information, a needs assessment, and the actual revision work. The TAC Project agenda format was as follows:

Day 1—3 PM to 8 PM:

- Opening and Introductions
- Plan for the day:
 - What is the TA Customizer Project?
 - Why are we here?
 - What are the expected outcomes for this work?
- Background:
 - What do we know about special education in charter schools?
 - Overview of special education responsibilities in the state's charter schools?
 - Resources on the Primer website
- State Needs Assessment:
 - What resources for special education already exist in our state?
 - What other resources do we need and why?
 - What do authorizers need?
 - What do operators need?
 - What do state officials need?
- Getting what we need:

- What will it take to get that work done?
- Who will take the lead in meeting the needs?
- Dinner:
 - Time for informal networking and discussion of state's needs

Day 2—8:00 AM to 3 PM

- Small group work creating the state's primer documents
- Review of work completed, next steps, and closing remarks

Although the TAC Project agenda is specific to the charter school and special education issue, the agenda components can be customized to address any national issue for which state-specific materials are needed.

The TAC Process: Opening, Introductions and Plan for the Day

Providing a context for the meeting and setting expectations for the participants is very important to the process. Likewise, introductions and ensuring all stakeholders know which constituency each person represents is helpful since the participants are the “experts” who will be revising the national document so that it has relevance for the state.

The TAC Process: Background and Context

The TAC facilitators provide background information for each state meeting. Generally, background information should include research results on the topic being reviewed and also the major issues the stakeholder groups face when addressing the chosen topic. Summarizing key points about the issue ensures that all participants enter the revision process with the same basic set of information no matter their specific role. It also provides a context from which participants can review the national level materials and work on revising them.

The TAC Process: State Needs Assessment

In most areas for which this type of process would be appropriate, states likely have some state-specific technical assistance materials available. However, it may be that not all stakeholders are aware of these resources. On the other hand, some states may have developed few technical assistance resources on the topic for review. Thus, a state needs assessment serves two purposes. First, it allows participants to be informed about the various materials available within the state, discuss the value of those materials, and determine the role those documents should play in the revision of the national materials. Second, participants can identify areas that may not be included in the state-specific resource, but are important for addressing at a later date. One of the reasons states need to have a broad range of stakeholders at the workgroup meeting is so that the perspectives on technical assistance needs can be discussed and reviewed

across constituencies. The state needs assessment provides a forum for those discussions.

It is recommended that the needs assessment discussion be recorded on a computer attached to an LCD projector (or similar technology) so that all participants can view the information as it is being discussed. The document is then given to the state contact person for use in future planning. The result is a tool that can contribute to future planning and resource development as well as focus the group on developing content for the materials at hand. During the needs assessment process meeting participants are asked to:

- identify current technical assistance resources and the parties responsible for the resources;
- identify what additional resources were needed to meet the state's need; and
- suggest organizations or individuals for following up upon the need.

The TAC Process: Networking

One of the valuable outcomes of the TAC process was the opportunity for networking. TAC participants repeatedly mentioned how beneficial the process was for meeting and communicating with other stakeholders. The 3 PM to 8 PM schedule includes time for dinner and informal discussions among participants. Even though many participants may be from the same agency or organization, they often have little opportunity to discuss the technical assistance issues addressed at the meeting. Some participants may not be aware of the wealth of information or resources available within their state and the TAC process provides a forum for sharing of information across stakeholder groups. The schedule is deliberately set so that the “experts” have time for informal discussion over dinner after the background and self-assessment agenda items are concluded; thus, stimulating discussion on all aspects of the topic.

The TAC Process: The Revisions

The actual revision of the contents of the national materials occurs on the second day. In the case of the TAC Project work, revisions were made to the operators' and authorizers' primers—the two documents that covered the major activities in the charter field. Replication of this technical assistance model may involve a different work schedule depending on the amount and type of materials involved.

The revision process followed for the TAC Project included the following components:

1. The participants were divided into two groups with representatives most familiar with a particular primer (authorizers or operators) comprising that small group.
2. Each subgroup worked with a facilitator who documented the revisions on a computer connected to an LCD projector. The facilitator typed the recommended changes in real time to allow everyone to view and have input into the content as it was being customized.

3. The facilitator led the small group through the primer from the first page to the last page in the six- to seven-hour period. Each small group reached consensus on modifications, deletions, language changes, and additions so that the issues within the primer were specific to their state.
4. The changes were stored in the computer and given to the meeting organizer.

The TAC Process: The Follow-up

The responsibility for follow-up tasks necessary for the development of the final product is determined prior to meeting adjournment. The follow-up process typically involves the following elements.

1. Follow-up tasks are assigned at the conclusion of the meeting with the organizer facilitating the discussion.
2. The organizer edits the revised documents for grammar and clarification within two weeks of the meeting.
3. The edited documents are sent via email to the state officials assigned for internal review and subsequently to the full workgroup for the next level of review.
4. Recommended changes are returned via email to the organizer for further editing.
5. The organizer sends the final draft to the state for final approval. It is not unusual for the final review by state officials to be somewhat lengthy because each state has its own process for approval of materials that are placed on the state website.

Some states must follow a state-mandated dissemination policy; others have state policies regarding web postings and printing. These issues are handled at the state level with the state officials having the final responsibility for product development and dissemination unless another organization has been assigned that task.

The TAC Process: The Final Product

Typically, the state is responsible for dissemination of the final product with the state-specific document added to the state website. Personnel from the specific divisions of the state agency are usually responsible for updates.

LESSONS LEARNED

The TAC Model has proven to be an effective method for translating national research and technical assistance documents into state-specific materials. Several lessons were learned throughout the TAC implementation in 13 states that may assist others as they undertake revising national materials for state-specific purposes.

The process needs a champion: Someone within the state must see the need and initiate the process. Although the TAC Model is designed to maximize the use of

national materials and the use of stakeholders' time, the model requires someone from within the state to see the value and move the process forward.

State buy-in is important: It is important that the organizer and state contact person investigate the state's overall vision in the area that will be addressed. It is possible to go through the TAC process and find that the state's chief school officer or others have different priorities. Reviewing the process and the final goal with officials within the state or organization with final responsibility for dissemination should occur prior to initiating the TAC process.

Participation of many groups of constituents ensures a better outcome: Although it may be tempting to choose a stakeholder group consisting of those individuals with whom the contact or organizer is most familiar, the process is most effective if all relevant constituencies are represented. By including a wide range of constituents in the process, the most critical issues for the state emerge and can be addressed.

Facilitation is key to a successful process: The facilitators play the most critical role in working with the stakeholder group to ensure all voices are heard and that any disagreements or past grievances do not disrupt the process. It is important to choose facilitators who are knowledgeable about the relevant issues but do not have a preconceived agenda.

The organizer must be tenacious: Most of the work for the customizing process is concluded within a 24-hour period, but there continues to be the need for well organized planning in advance and dogged follow-up. The organizer's role is critical to the successful completion of the state-specific materials. Though some states and stakeholder groups require little follow-up, some require a taskmaster such as an organizer who sends reminders and sets deadlines so the state customizing process is successfully concluded.

CUSTOMIZING FOR OTHER APPLICATIONS

Technical assistance is often considered a key component of any successful initiative. Providing practitioners in any field with background information, skill development, and time for reflection is essential to the implementation of theories and best practice research results. A common refrain often voiced by education practitioners and policy makers is that professional development and technical assistance are less than relevant and a waste of precious and well-guarded time. A process that allows for learning and action in creating useful resources is necessary to engage practitioners and to ensure the time is used wisely resulting in desired outcomes.

The TAC process addresses these issues by utilizing national materials and turning them into useable state-specific documents in a short period of time. The process is equally relevant for other areas of education. Whether the national materials address dropout prevention, individual education plans, or best practices in physical education,

the approach can be helpful in adapting available materials to make them more useful and effective to a state or other organization. By following the TAC process, state and local education agencies have an efficient and effective approach to customizing national materials to their needs and audiences.

RESOURCES

Information about the national primers and the state-specific primers developed through the TAC process are available at <http://www.uscharterschools.org/specialedprimers> .

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